

Five Long Years

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Summary: It was supposed to be a quick and decisive win, but it turned into a taste of things to come. A story of the Harvest Campaign.

Five Long Years

****Epsilon Indi System****

****1027 Military Standard Time****

****March 2, 2526****

It floated through the darkness of space, a hundred meters of ragged metal and composite. In the hard vacuum, it glowed brightly without any medium to release its stored heat into. Onwards it tumbled. The heating it had received brought out the internal stresses of the forging process, and it ever so slowly twisted and folded itself into sinuous curves and loops without gravity to assert control. It picked up molten micro-particulate as it soared silently through the void. These miniscule fragments of softened metals and loose carbon added to its shape slowly but surely.

Space was vast, an understatement much like how the oceans of Earth were deep. But in this great deepness lies the true unpredictability of chance. What was once lost could be found again, while certainties were easily lost forever. The object continued its tumble, free of any planetary gravity wells and unimpeded by anything of sufficient mass to stop or alter its course. Half-molten metal folded and unfolded in a continual process of rebuilding until its heat would eventually expend itself. A tattered shred of metal unfurled itself like a flag, showing its colors. There across it were still-legible words written in black enamel:

UNSC Constantinople****

But as the remnants of a once-great ship continued its slow tumble

into random oblivion, something decidedly determined was happening. Space folded and tore along guided "lines." Reality in a bubble nearly half a kilometer in diameter became traumatized by the quantum magic pioneered by Tobias Shaw and Wallace Fujikawa. In that contained area, the nothingness of space turned forty-nine degrees to the right of reality for less than a split second. Any sensors pointed towards the area would have been blinded by the flash of Cherenkov radiation.

As time and space righted itself, it became evident what the brutalization of reality had heralded.

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><p>"Battle Group X-Ray, this is the Vauban. Please respond."

Lieutenant Commander Errol Ludevicus rolled his rosary between his fingers as he stood on the bridge of the UNSC _Vauban_ behind most of his crew. Unlike most ships of the line, the _Vauban_ and the rest of the _Chard_-class combat support vessels had their bridges buried deep within the bowels of the design, leaving the crew reliant on electronic means of seeing their surroundings. Coming fresh out of a slipspace transfer meant coming in all but blind.

"Battle Group X-Ray, this is the UNSC _Vauban_. Please respond," Ensign Walters repeated from his seat at the communications station.

They were sitting ducks at the bottom of a barrel with clipped wings. Sensors were still resetting, and they were not painting a pretty picture thus far. The space they had jumped into was littered with detritus. Active IFF pings were coming from everywhere, and there were multiple contacts with the same identifier. That could have only meant one thing what with numerous IFF transponders being installed throughout ship frames.

As more of the sensors cycled back to full, he understood what it had to be like to be standing on the killing floor of an ancient slaughterhouse. Frigates and cruisers alike had been stretched and torn like taffy. Whatever had struck them had not vaporized them like an Archer missile strike on some Innies shuttle. That would have been a mercy. These had been warped by pinpoint strikes of what appeared to be some sort of plasma weapon. Ships that could have shrugged off tactical nuclear detonations had been gutted and turned inside out.

"UNSC _Vauban_, this is the UNSC _Say My Name_," a voice came on over the COM. "We have eyes on you. Good to see you."

Ludevicus sighed, relaxing slightly. "_Say My Name_, what is the status of _Everest_ Actual?"

"_Everest_ has sustained damage to her maser array, _Vauban_. We have to route messages through our COM. _Everest_ Actual sends his regards."

"_Say My Name_, is the area clear?" Ludevicus said, glancing over to the Shaw-Fujikawa clock. "We would like to start cleaning up."

"_Vauban_, we have confirmed no stragglers. However, _Everest_ Actual has chopped one flight of Longswords to you as escort. You are free to begin operations."

"Thank you, _Say My Name_. We'll try to get this done as quickly as possible. _Vauban_ out." Ludevicus said. He gestured to Walters. "Notify the crews for launch. Full complement for body retrieval and get our demolition charges primed just in case."

Chard-class ships were in truth very small carriers. Each one carried a complement of thirty "Butcher Birds," specialist D77s intended for vacuum engineering duties, in addition to three Longsword interceptors. While the Longswords pulled security, the Butcher Birds would get to work.

Ludevicus could remember the fighting at the beginning of his career as a lieutenant. Battles with Insurrectionists tended to be brutal but relatively clean. However, space fights were always going to toss a lot of spall and debris around. And the lanes had to be cleared so that trade could flow. That was where the United Nations Space Command's engineers came into play. ENGCORP ships kept space clean, handling the little details that the mainstream UNSCDF tended to overlook.

The bridge was quiet as the Butcher Birds were launched, the crew busy with their tasks. This was unglamorous work and completely unlike how the movies liked to dramatize naval operations. All of those shouts and grand gestures only worked if you wanted none of your orders to get through. Ludevicus looked over his bridge, his men. None showed any outward reaction to the graveyard they were cleaning up. A series of friendly contacts approached them, weaving between the larger debris.

"UNSC _Vauban_, this is Mameluke Three-One, flight of six Longswords. Ready to receive orders," the flight leader reported as the angular shapes of the interceptors resolved themselves on the visual scanners.

Ludevicus nodded to himself. "Mameluke Three-One, I need you to run overwatch for our D77s. Debris field's a tricky place to be, so watch yourselves."

"Copy, _Vauban_. Mameluke Three-One is breaking to provide protection."

It was not hard at all to pick up on the edge in the flight leader's voice. All of the Longswords showed battle scars, long burns running along the armor plating of the wings. Completely unlike what human weaponry could do. They had been through hell and back, and glorified bodyguard duty for a few Butcher Birds was not exactly something Ludevicus would want to do either. But they still did not have a good idea of what was in the area, and D77s were not exactly equipped for space combat.

He walked over to his chair and sat down as Mameluke split off to protect the launching Birds. A glance upwards showed him the brown orb that seemed only an arm's breadth away. Harvest. It seemed so different from the images they had seen during briefing. There were visible lines on the surface, a bright orange-yellow carved into the

crust with deliberation. Inhuman deliberation. Lieutenant Commander Ludevicus shuddered to think of what could have done it.

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><p>UNSC _**Monolith**_**, Procyon System**

1249 Military Standard Time

February 25, 2526

"We're dealing with fucking _aliens_?"

Lance Corporal Stephen Hawkins's question broke the silence. The briefing room aboard the UNSC _Monolith_ smelled of paint and the company of marines from the 25th Marine Regiment crowding it, but the tension was thicker than even that.

"That's right," the ONI lieutenant said, waving her hand at the screen that wrapped around the walls of the room. "The Colonial Militia captured these images during the evacuation."

For aliens, they seemed pretty normal-looking to the marines. Two arms, two legs, and a head. Sure, they had unspeakably large shitloads of ugly smeared all over them, but they were at least humanoid and weren't completely alien. Years of theorizing that non-movie aliens would have none of the features human had went right out the airlock. On the other hand, these were not actors wearing furry suits.

"These are the most common occurring in their forces," the lieutenant said, bringing one set of images to the forefront. "Designate 'Grunt'."

Squat things with gray-brown pebbly skin, from what little showed behind their armor. Incongruously garish plates of armor encased them like a jeweled carapace. The images were mostly static with occasional snippets from security cameras. They moved like bipedal pigs, waddling on stumpy legs and yapping like dogs. Size estimates had them as a bit shorter than the average marine. Moving packs, they carried pistol-looking things that bore more of a resemblance to a pair of "C"s joined to form a crude circle. There were other weapon-looking things, but those appeared to be the most prevalent.

"From what we have seen and can extrapolate, these Grunts are your typical foot soldier. Their leaders use them to spearhead any assault or advance, taking most of the casualties. And from the evidence, they can take _lots_ of casualties. Typical force composition appears to number roughly twenty Grunts per squad element."

"Ma'am," Staff Sergeant Amir Lochland said, raising his hand. "What's the leadership like? Is this a caste system?"

"Of a sort, Staff Sergeant," the lieutenant said. "Our early recoveries show that their DNA is radically different from each other, indicating that they are not related in terms of blood. However, I am glad you brought that up."

She changed the spread again. Now they were looking at what could be

best described as giant gorilla bear things. "Giant slabs of muscle, teeth, and hair" might have been a close second though. They towered over the Grunts with their ornate if sparse armor. Hell, their fur was probably bulletproof or something. Sharp teeth and jagged metal armor only served to emphasize the new alien.

"The militia referred to these as 'Fur Balls' and 'Brutes.' For the sake of brevity, we have chosen to designate them 'Brutes.' They have been seen to be extremely aggressive and primitive. Also, they appear to be carnivorous." She paused for a moment to let the fact sink in. "From what we have seen, the military organization focuses around them and is extremely stratified. Should you be able to kill or incapacitate a Brute, its subordinates will be thrown into disarray."

Another image. This one was about the same size as the Grunts. But that was where the similarity ended. Where the Grunts were mostly chunky gray forms, these things were coppery and all sharp angles. They looked almost like bipedal carrion birds carrying translucent bucklers. A few short snippets showed what were probably MA3 rounds bouncing off the bucklers like hail off a car hood. That did not bode well.

"Designate 'Jackal'," she said simply. "These are irregular shock units from what we've seen. They were seen using the same weapons as the Grunts, with the addition of those shielding units. The shields have been demonstrated to be extremely resilient to firearms. Explosives are the order of the day for them. A number of them use also these," a purple wedge-shape slid into focus. It was about half as tall as a marine. "A form of particle beam weaponry. Extremely precise."

A new series of images and video clips slid into focus. "A word on enemy defensive abilities. Forces encountered have been seen to use extraordinarily advanced energy-based shielding. Brutes of higher rank have been seen with personal full-body energy shielding which has been proven resistant to most lower-caliber rounds. The Jackals' shielding units share similar qualities, albeit amplified greatly but with significantly limited coverage. However, without these, they are as vulnerable as you and I to being shot." It wasn't much of a relief, but it drew some chuckles. "Colonel Jamison will continue with the relevant information for operations."

She stepped aside and seemingly faded into the shadows, a talent that seemed to be a prerequisite for naval intelligence types. Colonel Rahud Jamison took her place, accompanied by another switch of the information displayed behind and around him. These were aerial shots of cities and surveillance imagery, with notations and scribbled lines pointing out areas of interest.

"Marines, you are going to be the tip of the spear," he said. "Fleet has been authorized use of orbital bombardment, but you Marines will be needed to clean up. Now," he used a laser pointer to highlight one area, a densely forested plateau. "Orbital surveillance shows that the aliens have a minimal presence here, mostly what appears to be some type of excavation going on. This battalion is going to see what the hell they're digging up and make sure they don't continue."

"Now, you're not going in naked," Jamison said. "The Monolith is going to be following you down, and supplying fire as needed."

Additionally, you'll have a squadron off the _Everest_, Shortswords, callsign Cleaver. They'll have the good stuff."

"Sir, any idea what the situation is like on the ground?" Lieutenant Giorgio Sims asked. "Some of those landing sites look like someone took a blowtorch to them."

"Someone _did_ take a blowtorch to them," Jamison said, highlighting a video clip that had been taken on the ground. Taken from the cover of a forest, it showed a purplish metal whale of a ship hovering over a firebase that was taking fire from unseen enemies. A thin white beam of light flashed downwards and the ragged collection of pre-fabricated walls and emplaced weapons melted away in an orange-white flash. "This was footage taken by a stay-behind, Army Fourth ID's Second Regiment. They uploaded this to the CMA _Heracles_ when they were overhead. We've still been getting pings from their equipment, but I wouldn't get my hopes up." He rewound and froze the video at the moment before the beams touched down. "This is what you do not need to worry about. The alien ship used some form of energy weapon not unlike the stuff they use on the ground. Very accurate, very destructive. They were using it on the planet surface itself in a form of orbital bombardment." He stopped for a moment to let it sink in. "But as I said, that is one thing you do _not_ need to worry about. Our mobilizing means that Admiral Cole has knocked the ship out of the sky."

"Each company is getting their specific orders uploaded right now. Hugin and Munin are going to be assisting with coordination. That will be all."

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><p>The warning klaxon for the Monolith's coming transition into Slipospace distracted them for only a moment. Pulling another clip from the box, PFC Serge Norton mounted it on the lip of the magazine and slid the rounds into the magazine in a single motion. MA5Bs were nice to have with their quad-stacked sixty-round magazines, or at least they were in theory. Whichever bureaucrat had written up that requirement needed to carry the full combat load of ammo for a few hours. Or for the matter, they should try loading the damn things with the clips they were issued.

"Fucking _aliens_, man," Lance Corporal Hawkins said, sitting on his bunk and pressing his forehead against the glacis of his sealed helmet. "You think we're packing enough to take these guys out? I mean, we're talking about a civilization that's got the tech to go jaunting at interstellar distances. They've got energy shields, for fuck's sake!"

"Hawkins, shut up and keep loading," Norton said. "Fatigues, rations, medical, and ammo."

"I know how to fucking combat load," Hawkins snapped. "What I don't know is how the fuck our bullets are going to beat lasers and force fields and shit."

"Well, I've got a little idea that starts with a 'Magnetic' and ends with a 'Cannon' and consists of three words," Corporal Hollis Mboto said, sitting back in his bunk and tossing a foil-sealed MRE into the air. "If that doesn't work, well..."

The door slid open and Sergeant Mulholland Tarkas walked in, his lower body encased in matte plates that provided protection for his extremities from bullets to shrapnel to a well-placed boot. The M75 armor was lightweight but very protective as long as you kept buttoned up. His torso plates were partially closed up, and he finished snapping the joints together as he spoke.

"Rally up, Bravo. Captain's called for a morale run."

Norton stared at his sergeant as if he had grown a giant set of genitals on his forehead. A morale run was a fine tradition that he didn't see a reason for beyond the obvious one: Tormenting them. It required each marine to strap up and load their rucksack to the limit before heading out for a tour of the posting at a "brisk" jog. And if anyone was unfortunate enough to think that it was a good idea to eat before the run, they would be cleaning their mistake off their boots.

"Well, you heard Sergeant Tarkas," Mboto said, sitting up. "Let's get it done. We can get sick later."

* * *

><p>Major Sondra Avery accessed the COM network with a few eyeblinks. The augmented reality interface spread out before her eyes as if she were sitting in the middle of a holotank, all courtesy of the decade-old semi-organic neural interface lattice grown into the base of her skull that was now wirelessly hitched to her computer terminal five feet away. From there it was simple enough to start sorting out the details of the landings. Hugin and Munin were already streaming the dissected intel onto battalion COM, going further in-depth with extrapolations and extremely scientific wild-ass guesses that only a dedicated paired AI could create.<p>

"Sondra, you're missing the spectacle," Colonel Jamison said, hands clasped behind his back as he looked out the window of the stateroom. "It's a rather clever way of distracting them," he said. "I might even have to pass it up to Mare Nubium with due credit."

Avery smiled slightly at the mention of the Luna academy but continued sorting through the data. On her "suggestion," the captains under her had taken their marines for morale runs. It helped to focus their aggression, as well as distract them from thinking too hard about the coming mission. This was a verified alien threat. It was better to keep the troops occupied with chickenshit rather than sitting around and stewing for the five day transit to Harvest. That had been true during the Insurrection, and it would hold true now.

"You mean you want to steal all the credit, sir?" she asked, using her lattice-driven haptic interface to begin to chopping up her battalion's area of responsibilities. "Do you think the Admiral succeeded?"

"The man's a genius," Jamison said. "I served on the _One For The Money_, back when he was a commander. If anyone can win with unknown conditions, my money would be on him."

Nodding, she rechecked the authorizations for atmospheric support.

And stopped.

"Sir, the Monolith is cleared for atmospheric MAC shots?" Avery asked incredulously. "I thought they were keeping those for transorbital, and saving the Archers for atmospheric support."

"Yes they are," he said, turning. "I don't think you quite understand just how much HIGHCOM wants this to go without a hitch. And you clearly haven't read up on the part where we're going to have Shockies in our AO."

Finding the relevant segment, the major started swearing profusely.

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><p>Author's Rant: Oh yes, another Halo story from me. Expect some attempts at rationalizing and modifying Halo canon to actually make sense. Leave a comment whenever possible, comments fuel the writing machine. For anyone who's read my older works, I'm working on continuing them, but don't expect updates soon. For a moment of answering the mail...
I'm honestly fine with a good chunk of the canon and am actually looking forward to Halo 4. But the crap that Traviss pulled with Glasslands is basically inexcusable. In a way, I actually started writing "An Easy Road" as a response to that. This is more of a general "Look at what the UNSC could/would actually have before the Covenant glassed them." The neural lattice augmented reality interface that Avery is using is a prime example of it, where in my interpretation, humanity and the UNSC were basically going through a proper scientific revolution fueled by the Insurrection that only really stopped as the Covenant started turning primo research facilities into glass. There are elements of this going on with "An Easy Road," but that story isn't so focused on the technology as this is.

End
file.